

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 330 704

TM 016 270

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 TITLE The Formation of Educational Reform as a Social Field in Iceland in the 1970s and the 1980s: Legitimizing Principles and the Social Strategies of Epistemic Individuals.
 PUB DATE Apr 91
 NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 3-7, 1991).
 PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Change Strategies; *Educational Change; Educational Improvement; Educational Theories; Educational Trends; Elementary Education; Epistemology; *Foreign Countries; School Restructuring; *Social Science Research
 IDENTIFIERS *Iceland

ABSTRACT

Reform in elementary education in Iceland during the last 25 years is discussed in the context of the conceptual framework developed by Pierre Bourdieu. The reform that started in the 1960's provides an opportunity to examine the usefulness of Bourdieu's concepts of legitimating principles that are historically and socially constructed and social strategies that convert discursive themes into symbolic capital. In Iceland, reform challenged the prereform tradition in many ways, particularly in advocating scientific curriculum strategies, progressive pedagogy, and developmental psychology. Bourdieu's concepts of the "habitus," a durable principle of regulated improvisations that produces social strategies, and his idea of epistemic individuals who shape and are shaped by events are illustrated by Icelandic educational reform efforts. Educational theory had not existed in Iceland prior to the reform effort; there was no Icelandic educational theory habitus before the reform. The social strategies needed to make political advances for educational reform were especially unpredictable. The three spectra of legitimating principles of discursive themes operating in the social field of educational reform were: (1) reform versus the prereform spectrum; (2) the reform spectrum with its technological and progressive poles; and (3) traditional academic capital versus curriculum theory capital. A 68-item list of references is included. (SLD)

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**The Formation of Educational Reform as a Social Field in
Iceland in the 1970s and the 1980s: Legitimizing Principles and
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BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Presentation at the American Educational Research Association
conference, Chicago, Illinois, April 3-7, 1991

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The research that this paper presents ¹⁾ has two major purposes: On one level, it is a study of reform in elementary education in Iceland in the last 25 years. On another level, the study is a "test" of a conceptual framework developed by the French sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu (see References). On this level, the reform is a site to examine the usefulness of Bourdieu's notions of **legitimizing principles** that are historically and socially constructed and **social strategies** that convert educational and cultural capital into symbolic capital.

The problems focused on in this paper are the intersection of discourses in what I call "the field of educational reform in Iceland" in last 25 years (i.e., 1966-1991) and the use of Bourdieu's notions of habitus and epistemic individuals to interpret the involvement of individuals in the reform.

The reform can be interpreted as a trajectory ²⁾ of social strategies of educationists who strive to convert discursive themes into symbolic capital. These social strategies have created a field of competing legitimizing principles wherein what I call the professionalization of progress and educational expertise is near the top of the hierarchy but competes with pre-reform values, traditional academic values, and progressive values.

I found three spectrums of historically and socially constructed legitimizing principles of discursive themes that operate in the social field of educational reform in Iceland which are the available strategies for players in the field (reformers) to capitalize on. These are the reform versus the pre-reform spectrum, the reform spectrum with the technological and progressive poles, and the traditional academic capital versus the curriculum theory capital spectrum.

Genealogy and legitimizing principles

To investigate the historical conjuncture of discourses and pedagogical practices in contemporary Icelandic society, I use a genealogical analysis similar to that of Michel Foucault (e.g., 1971, 1972, 1977, 1980; see also Luke 1989, Noujain 1987). Genealogy traces how discursive elements break up and reconnect to form new discursive elements and beliefs, in contrast with searching for causal relationships and the essential nature of ideas. Genealogy searches for continuities and discontinuities (ruptures and breaks) in discourses and social practices, and examines the relationship between these continuities and discontinuities. The main strength of this approach is that it enables to see how the significance of these elements, which I call **discursive themes**, and practices emerge in a particular place and time.

The reform

Let me briefly outline the reform that was launched in the 1960s. It was

put forward by a governmental agency, the Department of Educational Research and Development (DERD) in the Ministry of Culture of Education. DERD launched projects in subject matters, such as physics and chemistry, biology, mathematics, Icelandic, Christian studies, Danish, English, social studies, the art and crafts, and physical education. The social studies part of this comprehensive curriculum project came under an attack from conservative critics in 1983 (see Edelstein 1987, Thorsteinn Gunnarsson 1990 for overviews of the debate).³⁾ This presentation focuses upon how the reform **discourse** collided with other discourses -- not the implementation of the reform.

The pre-reform web

I like to use of the metaphor of a web about the pre-reform tradition. In this web there are patterns of prevalent cultural assumptions concerning the nature of intelligence as inherent and knowledge as fixed knowledge, of congregational pedagogy (uncritical transmission to a group of students who only answer what is pre-described, such as in a Lutheran mass), nationalistic knowledge base created when Iceland was still under Danish authority, and scientist ideas and practices. The last pattern consists of written tests, the major means of evaluation in Icelandic schools. Written tests, which were introduced in Iceland in the early part of the twentieth century, strengthened the transmission of a nationalistic and fragmentary cultural literacy-type knowledge base which is difficult to change once it is in the school. Written tests also fit well with the cultural assumptions of knowledge and intelligence, excellence and achievement because they "objectively" report who is the most knowledgeable (intelligent) child.⁴⁾

The web I have described is a typical point of intersection of the discourse of scientism (tests and measurement) and congregational pedagogy that sanction a nationalistic knowledge base. Therefore, memorization in Icelandic schools (what is memorized, under which circumstances it is memorized) is not of any pure essential origin; rather, it is an example of a practice derived from a historically constructed legitimating principle.

The reform principle versus the pre-reform principle

The reform challenges the pre-reform tradition in many ways. In the reform there is a pattern of **scientist arguments for democratic and child-centered concerns**. There are progressive education themes; in particular, open schools were celebrated as a prototype of the most proper reform practice. There is a belief in scientist curriculum models, such as the Bloom taxonomy and the Taba curriculum spiral, and developmental psychology *a la* Piaget and Kohlberg. There is a belief in activity pedagogy.

Other themes include the beliefs that knowledge is process, that the learner is active, that evaluation needs to be constant, and that subject matters need to be integrated. "Buzzwords" are, for instance, activity, inquiry, hands-on, integration of subjects, and integration of students. 5)

By presenting itself in opposition with the pre-reform pedagogy, the reform became a set of legitimating principles, capable of structuring a social field of educational reform that is based on a sense of logic different from that of the larger field of education and different from the logics of other intellectual fields. For instance, it does not matter whether the pre-reform pedagogy was in fact plagued by uncritical transmission of outdated facts; what matters is the ability of the reformers to present inquiry learning and hands-on pedagogy as different from and better than (more democratic, more scientific) the pre-reform pedagogies, what matters is the ability to challenge the old hierarchy of values and structure the arena that I have named the field of educational reform.

Tensions in the reform

The reform/pre-reform spectrum of legitimating principles is the main spectrum of opposite poles in the field of educational reform. In fact, there are two other spectrums which I have identified. They are represented in a tension between scientism -- what I call the technological pole -- and democratic and child-centered perspectives -- what I call the progressive pole -- and in struggles over what counts as academic capital.

In short, I argue that there still is an alliance between proponents of technological and progressive views. One reason for that is attacks on the social studies; another reason is the strength of psychology and the appeal that Hegelian dialectic in Piaget's developmental psychology had for leftists steeped into Marxist thought. As progressivists, such as Thorsteinn Gunnarsson (1990; see also Thorsteinn Gunnarsson and Ingólfur A. Jóhannesson 1990), start attacking the epistemological and historical foundations of developmental psychology and other scientist theories, we may see this alliance collapse.

Traditional academic capital, curriculum theory capital

Another discursive pole that I have observed is represented by people with degrees in educational theory -- pedagogy, curriculum theory, educational psychology, etc. -- who increasingly make the claim that such theories are invaluable in its own right and that teacher education should not be structured around the notions prevalent in traditional academic disciplines (Ólafur J. Proppe, Sigurjon Myrdal and Bjarni Danielsson, in progress). In contrast, others, including many teacher educators with

degrees in traditional academic disciplines, believe that teacher education needs to rely more on a solid education in those disciplines and discipline-specific pedagogy classes. I call this spectrum the traditional academic capital versus curriculum theory capital spectrum.

Social strategies and the habitus

The discursive themes of the reform derived from developmental psychology, scientific curriculum theories, and progressive pedagogies -- the reform legitimating principle -- became the educational and cultural capital of reformers. According to Bourdieu's framework, educational and cultural capital has to be converted into symbolic capital to count in a given field, and it is the "physical expansion" of the discourse (to government institutions, teacher unions, teacher education institutions, schools, newspaper debates, and other "sites") that determines how "successful" the conversion strategies are.

The notion of **social strategies** (e.g., Bourdieu 1984, 1986b, 1988) enables to see the individual "self" in motion and in relation to the social structures and how these structures are perceived. Bourdieu sees strategy as "the product of a practical sense, of a particular social game ... , [of] an improvisation that is absolutely necessary in order for one to adapt to situations that are infinitely varied" (1986b, 112-13).

Social strategies affect the relations of the field where the participants are playing their social game. In other words, when a reformer starts using nationalistic arguments to argue for a curriculum theory notion of local curriculum projects, s/he may not have thought through exactly what might happen in that process. The result, however, is that that I, as a researcher and a participant, see a chance of capitalizing on the possibility of a domestic production of curriculum theory -- more precisely, a domestic production curriculum theory which I believe is especially suited for coastal and rural areas of the country. At least, I, based on my sense of the game, believe that such a notion has an appeal to nationalists in those areas and people on the left in general.

Strategies are derived from the **habitus**, a "durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations" (Bourdieu 1977, 78; 1990a, 57). The habitus is objectively orchestrated in identifiable social processes but not determined by them. The habitus produces social strategies and is produced by social strategies; it is "a structured and structuring structure" (Bourdieu 1984, 171). The relations between habitus and field are, "[o]n one side, ... **conditioning**: the field structures the habitus ... On the other side, it is a relation of **cognitive construction**: habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense and with value,

in which it is worth investing one's energy" (Bourdieu 1989b, 44).

I also want to stress that the habitus is a structured and structuring process no less than it is a structure. This is important because the intersection is constantly changing as discursive themes are continuously reconnected with other themes -- as I have already indicated -- with the result that the legitimating principles -- the hierarchies of values -- change.

Epistemic individuals in the field of reform

Bourdieu's notion of epistemic individuals directs attention away from individuals' intentions and helps objectifying the relations between them and with institutions. "Epistemic individuals" refers to the way of seeing individual persons as occupying spaces in structural relations, shaping and shaped by trajectory of events. I examined the education and careers of between three and four hundred individuals who are currently working in six leading sites (two teacher education institutions, one department of the Ministry of Culture and Education, the District Offices of Education that are located in eight districts across the country, the elementary teachers' union, and the National Center for Educational Materials) or once worked for DERD. Many of those who worked for DERD now work for other reform institutions.

I did a pilot investigation concerning to which pole these individuals might connect, epistemically, and found that more of the faculty in the University of Iceland's Division of Pedagogy and the College of Education had attended secondary education in the oldest elite-education institution in Iceland, the Reykjavik gymnasium, than the staff of the National Center for Educational Materials and the leadership of the elementary teachers' union, the Teacher Union of Iceland. Many people in the latter two sites have had a career as teachers or administrators in open schools. Because I did not systematically investigate the opinions that the epistemic individuals in these sites actually held, it is not possible, at this point, to firmly state, because of the secondary education patterns, that these institutions in fact tie into pre-reform and the academic poles or the progressive reform pole. But the tendencies are clear.

An intermediate field -- open for unconventional discursive themes and non-traditional people

The field that I am studying is a field where what works as capital and social competence had not been determined. Therefore, we may expect social strategies to be unconventional; that is, that unusual kinds of capital and strategies may become successful. In my research, I have identified what I call the professionalization of progress and educational expertise and the

"unluck" of the Icelandic right and the Reykjavik elite (people of the upper classes, bourgeoisie families, families in the state bureaucracy, and so forth), in relation to educational expertise, that leaves this field open for "non-traditional" people (i.e., individuals who have education in the least elitist institutions in secondary education, individuals with normal school-type teacher education, individuals who have a career in open schools, individuals with degrees in educational theory, etc.). This stems in part from the fact that it is time-consuming to convert the economic capital and social capital (e.g., family connections) that the Reykjavik elite possesses into capital that counts in the field of educational reform, namely scientist arguments for democratic and child-centered concerns. In contrast, the non-traditional people had less to lose and everything to win, given the strong beliefs and convictions many had.

I should explain what I mean by "professionalization of progress and educational expertise." Reformers were able to tie the goal of improving education for children with modern "science" and rationality -- in a similar vein as the public rhetoric of schooling in the United States that emerged in the late nineteenth century within professional communities (Popkewitz 1991). In other words, scientist arguments for **progressive** social goals were put forward by experts who "take care of this business." This is not unsimilar with the case of health professionals.

Conclusion

Social strategies converted ambiguous discursive themes (educational theory and democratic, child-centered goal goals) into symbolic capital (expertise) which stands near the top of a hierarchy of values in the field of educational reform. Educational theory -- as an academic discipline -- had not existed in Iceland prior to the reform (in fact, all social sciences have a short history in Iceland). The social strategies employed to make political advances for the emerging field of educational reform were, therefore, especially unpredictable; there was no "educational theory habitus" in Iceland prior to the reform that could by guide the "rules of the game."

Implications for research

By objectifying the discursive themes and looking for discursive intersections (conflicts and similarities), a researcher who may or may not have been involved in the reform, can focus on them without being pre-occupied with **why** the reform did not take place the way it was planned, as many previous interpretations of the reform have been concerned with (e.g., Edelstein 1987). It is possible for a reformer to objectify own convictions and positions in the reform field -- in a similar way as Bourdieu

does in his study of the French academia, **Homo Academicus** (1988). The beliefs -- discursive themes -- and positions of the researcher -- and other epistemic individuals -- are placed in a context of other discursive themes and positions in a field.

Reflections on Bourdieu's framework

Bourdieu's framework is particularly suited to deal with social change in ambiguous sites (fields). On the other hand, Bourdieu's set of concepts may not be as suited to replace Marxist categories to interpret "labor relations" (a euphemism for the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat) or psychology to explain a parent-child conflict, to take examples. Though comprehensive, Bourdieu's framework is not designed to totalize reality but to deal with reality as multiple discursive and sociological complexities.

1) The paper is based on research for a dissertation to be presented to the faculty of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin, Madison later this year.

2) By "trajectory" I mean that the history of the reform is unique yet it does have a logic which can only partially be uncovered as it is only partially predictable.

3) The Icelandic social studies curriculum project is in part based on the American controversial project, **Man: A Course of Study** (see Educational Development Center 1968-76). The Icelandic project was under the leadership of dr. Wolfgang Edelstein of the Max Planck Institut in Berlin who was an advisor to the Ministry of Culture and Education from 1966 to 1984. The biology curriculum for grades 8-10 (the highest grades of the elementary school) was a translation of the so-called blue version of **Molecules to Man** (see Biological Sciences Curriculum Study and Welch 1973).

4) The description of the pre-reform web is based on an extensive analysis of original and secondary sources. Only references in English are listed in the References. Other sources include books and articles in Icelandic, Danish, and Swedish.

5) The identification of the discursive themes of the reform is based on investigations and analyses of various types of sources. They include but are not limited to a draft of the general syllabus for primary schools (**Adalnamskra grunnskola** 1983), the elementary school teachers' union (Kennarasamband Islands, see **Skolastefna** 1990) school policy, what was emphasized in teacher education institutions around 1980 (among other sources, classnotes), conference proceedings, debates on crucial issues, interviews with teacher leaders and teacher educators, letters and correspondences, unpublished materials, as well as secondary sources.

6) Thanks to the Original Wednesday Group of the University of Wisconsin, Madison where a version of this paper was presented March 12, 1991 and to my advisor, Thomas S. Popkewitz, for help in formulating these arguments. Special thanks to David Shutkin, Sigurjón Myrdal and Hannu Simola of the O.G.W. who have spent uncounted hours discussing various aspects of this with me and the colleagues Thorsteinn Gunnarsson and Ingvar Sigurgeirsson in Iceland.

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